

CRISIS AND CIVILIZATION

The productions of goods and the laws governing their exchange are no longer enough to account for the economic reality with regard to which the idea of crisis is generally invoked. The psychological, intellectual and moral motivations that support the activity of production are seen today as more and more decisive factors but ones that are evasive. Thus the stakes that would govern economic crises (but are they not something else?) must be sought on new ground, around mental incitements, ethical references, networks of obligations that take the question of crisis beyond the economic domain, that would pose it in terms of civilizations.¹

The same expansion is observed in intellectual and political life, facts of pure sensitivity (which we should call esthetic, but how can we invest this word with the perception and vitality that is its due?) Here again, analyses, provided that they go as far as ultimate

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson.

¹ J. Bouvier, "Crises économiques," *Encyclopaedia universalis* Paris, 1974; P. Mahrer, "Crise économique," *ibid.*, Supplement, 2 vols., Paris, 1980, Vol. II.

Crisis and Civilization

reasons, lead to the same redeployment of perspectives.

The rapport of the idea of crisis with that of civilization brings the confrontation of hypotheses, methods and results into the greatest disparity. As far as crisis is concerned, it is only a matter of analyses governed by scientific exigency; as far as the state of civilization is concerned, it can only be a matter of syntheses and judgments, always relative, of value. None the less, the rapport of crisis with civilization imposes itself on the mind in an almost daily experience of a Utopia of peace and omnipresent violence, and we must undertake to examine it. Doubtlessly, it will be by agreeing that this examination stops at the stage of outline, a hypothesis of work waiting to be verified.

Let us take a unitary view of the state of civilization: the crises which traverse this state, however different are the points of attack, however radical the ruptures, are then inscribed on the same horizon. Thus may appear, beginning with the total field of anthropological experience, a single generative rapport of explanation attached to particular cases.

Among so many observations on civilization and the criteria that would allow us to distinguish it objectively, we consider the definition given by Arnold Toynbee to be essential: "Perhaps we can define civilization as an attempt to create a state of society in which humanity can live together in harmony."² A definition whose apparent simplicity allows an answer to the criterion that distinguishes civilization from culture, namely, that in the state of civilization, the beginning of the use of the cultural apparatus is consciously conducted with the scope of human liberation, a liberation that endows the society thus emancipated with influence over other cultures, by which the appearance of civilizations is also signalized.

With respect to this line of progress of civilization, crisis, on the contrary, appears as an almost permanent threat of rupture. Now, for such an attitude to emerge, there had to be a state of civilization. That happened in Athens in the 5th century B.C. and was expressed for the first time by Thucydides, with the feeling of exception and the fragility of the work of civilization. Tied to the

² A. Toynbee, *L'Histoire*, Bordas, Paris, 1985.

meditation of history seen in its entirety, this thought is again found in Polybius, who likened its alternatives of order and disorder to the cycles observed in nature. St. Augustine's vision, partly inherited from the Hebrew tradition in which the "City of God" and "City of Satan" exactly divided moments of civilization and moments of crisis, is a mythic parenthesis that prevailed over the Christian Middle Ages and that produced Machiavelli. The latter uncompromisingly adopted the positive and critical thought of Thucydides and Polybius, who thus appear as the authentic intercessors of the modern representation of history. It was also taken up by Montesquieu: it allowed him to conceive the institution of laws as a work of regulation governing political and social forces, like a veritable cybernetics, reminding us that the ancient Greek designated the art of government itself by this word.

Nietzsche proposed a heroic interpretation of crisis in terms of modernity of which he was one of the first analysts, and undoubtedly the most radical. A modernity in prey to a complete nihilism—to the "overturn of values." He suggested answers to the open crisis of European history following the line of thought of Thucydides, whose judgments on history he especially admired.³ Genius answered the ruptures of history by an affirmation that is based on only its will and its daring. This thought renewed the view of history; it prevailed with Oswald Spengler, who insisted on the specificity of civilizations, and with Arnold Toynbee, who taught us to interpret them in terms of a challenge.

On the other hand, Karl Marx saw crisis as not only foreign to the civilizing process but also destructive: this is a radicalism that we must clarify. It is the expression of a theoretical confidence that, very early, engaged Marxism in choices without concession whose intransigent logic we will discuss later on in this paper.

"The progresses in the history of mentalities and, consequently those of social history..." evoked nearer to us in time by Georges Duby,⁴ gives us a more refined reading of the movements of history. But have we clearly seen where the progress of the "new

³ F. Nietzsche, "Ce que je dois aux Anciens," *Le Crépuscule des idoles*, Paris, N.R.F., 1974, par. 1.

⁴ C. Duby, *Des sociétés médiévales*, Inaugural lesson at the Collège de France, Paris, N.R.F., 1971.

Crisis and Civilization

History” is leading us? Patiently accumulated, disposed in a global perspective, it allows the discovery of the activating role of poets, leaders, architects, artists and scholars, profoundly engaged in the tissue and invention of those expressions that are the “common treasure.” But this time we will interpret it at the good level, that of the generative structures of expressions, at the level of their weaving, at the level of mental power, of one of their limits.

Thus from Thucydides to the new historians, such is the course of a thought that is attached to the exploit of civilization in its rapport with crisis. Now, without leaving the unitary perception to which this introduction aspires, we should like to isolate the questions that the present crisis in history importunes in such a striking way today. Let us return then to the heroic actions of civilization in its rapport with crisis. We said that Thucydides was the first to name it particularly in “discourse on the first deaths of the war,” words that he has Pericles pronounce in *The Peloponnesian War*.⁵ The city of Athens arose through strokes of intelligence and daring above a contrary combination of events; conscious of the same perils it survived because of the same qualities. Does its superiority not come from the fact that the Athenians were always capable, in full prosperity, of similar audacity? Likewise, does not their superiority insist on “cultivating the beautiful towards the end of harmony and the things of the mind with rigor”? What Athens produced in works of art and thought served as a model for other cities, and thus it is, beyond particular cultures, the inspirer of civilization whose idea was here expressed for the first time. Athens arose at the price of a daring equal to risks that had to be taken to surmount the crisis that threatened its hegemony. Thus saying and thus reasoning, Thucydides expressed himself according to the profound instinct of the Hellenes testified to by the ancient Greek language. In this language, in fact, the word *krisis* designates the moment of decision, not the dangerous moment of turbulence leading to rupture, of imminent catastrophe, as it does in our language, but

⁵ Thucydides, *La Guerre du Péloponnèse*, trans. by Jacqueline de Romilly, Collection Budé, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1958; Book II, XXXIV-XLVI (we propose our translation here).

the choice irrevocably determining the sequence of actions, in one way or another. The Greeks were men obsessed by a precise contour, defined profiles, decisive forms in the manner of a stonemason who refuses to make corrections after his work is finished, while we are inclined to consider a crisis in terms of suspense, doubts and hesitations, as Paul Valéry does in *La crise de l'esprit*. Nothing like that for the ancient Greek whose instinct, at the very appearance of danger, has already decided on action: for him crisis was a judgment that brought with it a destiny without appeal. The *Peloponnesian War*, as awareness of the historical fact and singular beauty of writing, functions in that way.

Polybius inaugurated the concept of what Thucydides illustrated through action. He outlined its theoretical basis in his *History*, Book VI, which has as its objective "the various types of constitutions (and) the cycle according to which the various regimes follow each other through natural law".⁶ The political order, of which the Roman institutions appeared to him as one of the most remarkable forms that history had provided for observation, seemed to him like one of those important moments that mark the evolution of social groups—cities or states—in clear opposition to moments of anarchy that appear with the traits attached to it by the modern idea of crisis. These latter compose remarkable cycles with the former.

It is one more of the merits of the political thought of Machiavelli to have perceived that the base of social life is prey to a continuous metamorphosis. He says so in *The Prince*, and expresses it as a theory in the *Florentine Histories*. The "most ordinary effect of revolutions suffered by empires is to have them pass from order to disorder, to later lead them back to order. It has not been granted to human affairs to stop at a fixed point when they have arrived at their highest perfection; being unable to go higher, they descend and, for the same reason, when they have reached the lowest state of disorder, since they can fall no lower, they go up again and thus go successively from good to bad and from bad to good. *Virtù* engenders rest, rest idleness, idleness disorder and disorder the ruin of States; then from the midst of

⁶ Polybius, *Histoire*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris, N.R.F., 1970.

their ruin order is soon reborn, from order *virtù* and from *virtù* glory and prosperity".⁷ A most modern analysis. History is submitted to a cybernetic regulation in which the effect reacts on the cause; prosperity, brought about by order, also reunites the conditions for the relaxation of *virtù*; disorder makes discipline necessary.⁸ But there is more. The base of social life is turbulence, and we have there one of the most inspired thoughts of Machiavelli. It would have political action understood in the manner of an artistic form of the social fabric; it would permit the understanding that the most widely-recognized stable organization, established rule and institutional order are vulnerable creations of the human genius and that as such, exposed on all sides, they are so many arbitrary structures. Organization, rule and order make up a place of exchange that makes it possible for the same finality of civilization (or more simply social progress) to survive through fluctuations in events but it is through an englobing diversity, in the manner of a form able to co-exist with other systems having numerous unknown factors. It is therefore a totally modern thought, since it rests on the dissociation of the ideas of structure and system, structure representing an autonomous ensemble of interrelations and system an aleatory ensemble of interrelations open to infinity, investing with peripheral turbulences the structure that it surrounds and where, finally, the considered structures make up so many ordered groups, exceptional, vulnerable, exposed to catastrophes but that the human genius keeps in existence through successive inventions.

"A society raises itself from brutality to order. Since barbarism is the era of *fact*, it is necessary that the era of order be the empire of *fictions*, because there is no power capable of founding order on only constraint of bodies by bodies. There must be fictitious forces," writes Paul Valéry in his introduction to Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*.⁹ The French monarchical order furnished an underpinning for the serene, wise and witty thought of the author

⁷ N. Macchiavelli, "Histoires florentines," *Oeuvres complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris, N.R.F., 1964, p. 1168.

⁸ E. Radar, "Information et politique chez Machiavel," *Revue Générale*, Ded. 1983, Brussels.

⁹ P. Valéry, "Préface aux Lettres persanes", *Oeuvres complètes*, Bibl. de la Pléiade, 2 vols., Paris, N.R.F., 1957, Vol. I, p. 508.

of *De l'esprit des lois*. The conditions of social mastery can be assured through good laws provided they are borne in consciences as they are inscribed in edicts. But it is also necessary that the ones be regulated with regard to the others like the clockwork mechanisms of the epoch, through compensated weights. The exercise of power requires of each political actor an exact representation of roles with regard to an ensemble that soon becomes the most precious common good: the public matter, "*Res publica*"; Montesquieu bases social life on the intellectual control of political forces, which supposes an educated dominant class that has the time for it but one in which the contests are conducted in such "transparency" that democracy may arise from it at any moment and, in fact, is born from it, if we accept the idea of a purely intellectual generation—but is it not the merit of such works to establish such a genealogy?

De l'esprit des lois makes clear the structures that work in social life, with a differentiated reading. Everywhere, forces, naturally carried as far as abuse, are seen, everywhere a compensated exchange is proposed at the beginning of the just appreciation of the liberated energies and their reciprocal situation. It is beginning with this political reading that constitutions are set up, conceived as the management of a permanent crisis. Montesquieu's political judgment is one of complete skepticism but one that does not despair of the resources of skillful thought, that is, thought that, like David against Goliath, would never cease to oppose each challenge with the agile analysis of the mechanism that controls it.

When Nietzsche approached the problem of crisis in a Europe dedicated to nihilism, the decadence he diagnosed was in his eyes only the symptom of a civilization that had surrendered to the depression that had seized it. When the man of genius arrives, he imposes new values. Drawing from himself alone the reasons for his refusal, he imposes new "tables." The genius is in no way the product of his time; the relation of the exceptional man to his times is dialectic. The genius brings something essential, of irreducible essence, that comes from the volcanic qualities of his irruption. The contribution of a great mind is not identified with gestures, thoughts or works of the epoch that he gives form to with his will, although his intervention fits closely with the configurations of the moment, the invention that he engages is found in a contradictory,

Crisis and Civilization

even tragic, rapport with the epoch in which he lives.

No doubt the career of the genius will be affirmed, once its course is completed in a relationship necessary to his age, but it will never be in a rapport of subordination nor even of adequation. On the contrary, his contribution is to give form to what was incomplete, in an action that is eager to terminate what would have remained unfinished, even unthought of, without him. He appears as the violent assembly of energies lying in fallow: "Let us take the case of Napoleon. The France of the Revolution and even more so of the pre-revolutionary period, would by itself have produced a result exactly opposed to that of Napoleon, and in fact it did produce this type. And as Napoleon was *other*, heir to a more robust civilization, more immutable, more antique than the one that was in the process of being dislocated and vanishing in France, it is he who became the master..." The great man gave form to the social material lying fallow... "The epoch is still relatively much younger, lighter, green, uncertain, puerile," continues Nietzsche in *Le Crépuscule des idoles*.¹⁰

In the wake of Nietzsche, Spengler and later on Toynbee propose a meditation on history formed around the idea of the civilizing invention as a sovereign form in face of the one who denies it: Spengler discovered a dozen civilizations to which he lent an organic structure of an irreducible originality. Their law of development was prefigured in them the way a genetic code is in the embryo. One and the same law would govern individuals as well as whole populations. It is a "master form" whose figure would be revealed by true history through the various expressions of cultures: myths, symbols, sciences, art, politics. "The more profound the form the more rigorous and refractory it is;... the one who belongs to it dominates it with perfect ease and perfect liberty... the Prince de Ligne, Mozart... Universal history to the highest power... (it is) the inert print that comes to life..."¹¹ Established, but superior, the man of power has no respite from favorizing his talents. Thus he cannot fail to "unchain a current of unitary activity," the one stamped with his vitality and that of his

¹⁰ F. Nietzsche, "Ma conception du génie," *op.cit.*, par. 44.

¹¹ O. Spengler, *Le Déclin de l'Occident*, trans. by M. Tazerout, Paris, N.R.F., 1948, 2 vols., Vol. II, p. 40.

nation. An invention in the direction of a living orientation governed by a destiny with regard to which there is no crisis except through lack of faith, lack of confidence in oneself, cross-breeding, vulgar looseness... If Spengler's thought, mythic, organicist and aristocratic has not gone out of date it is because it points toward something else of whose discovery we have a presentiment: living organizations, from the cell of global society are governed by diverse temporalities of which technological reference is not sufficient to give an account. Myth is recourse of a free thought that goes beyond rational controls each time that they, in the present state of knowledge, deprive it of intuitive evidence that orders the internal architecture of the work, with which this thought is impregnated. Thus the lion's kingdom of the mind is preserved, its instinct in the presence of too commonplace reasons, while the extraordinary must be explained, maintain its quality of questioning of the explanation. Spengler's strength was to never swerve from that. Thus the *Decline of the West* continues to furnish us with interrogations, however daring the work is in its hypotheses.

Spengler wanted to read a destiny within the organic character of the unities of civilization: we know today that complex groups, from the cell to human societies, evolve by chance, from bifurcations to bifurcations, and that each of these opens up to multiple destinies, from their beginning to their full expansion. The great merit of Toynbee in *A Study of History* is to have seen the choice by which civilizations persevere in their substance, and that it is a choice of invention.¹²

Thus destiny, but in which Spengler was wrong to believe that the origins we see for civilizations prefigure their type and course. There are no civilizations except at the price of crises that they have successively challenged and from which, most often, they should have perished. From that comes the singular force of Toynbee's *Study*: for each of the twenty-one civilizations he considered, he described a collective exploit, the work of an energy carried to its limits of invention at the moment itself of "the greatest deviation in equilibrium." Or rather, like so many

¹² Toynbee, *op.cit.*

Crisis and Civilization

evolutions through crises and challenges overcome with increasing risk and audacity, calling for greater mastery and invention.

Thus in the study of the historical field proposed by Toynbee is prefigured this irreversible evolution that is history itself and to what point its model was materially plausible, as contemporary physics has revealed. By evoking the irreversibility of the future, “the rupture of symmetry in the equations with respect to time,” Prigogine and Stengers have described a single dynamic that unfolds a ...“history that scans a succession of bifurcations.”¹³

Throughout its existence, physics has served as a metaphor to designate the mental phenomena that elude positive experience: in these cases, it is not a matter of explanations but of an incidence favoring one hypothesis over another, orienting experiments following a logic that has found a primary form of coherence.

Can we doubt that there have been moments of equilibrium, of epochs characterized by synthesis, harmony, a conscious mastery of the processes that work on it, were it only as underpinning?

The idea of social periods dominated by an order of stability that distinguishes them from anarchical moments: is this only an illusion? The suspicion of the fallacious nature of moments of equilibrium is legitimate. Apogees, Golden Ages, acmes, are mythical representations that dissimulate the underlying turbulences. Those epochs called “classical” are in reality in a singular relationship with crisis—so singular that we have believed in its elision, but this relationship exists. Its is a point worth our consideration here.

Paul Valéry observes in *La crise de l'esprit* that “peace is perhaps the state of things in which the natural hostility of men toward each other is manifested by creativity rather than by destruction, as happens in war.”¹⁴ Times, groups and cultures have as a characteristic a creative component of a circulation of remarkable signs and works. Thus is manifested a state of civilization that is marked by a more intense creative activity and an astonishing pertinence. Crisis bores into the fabric of the social and political body and economic network, as it does in other periods, but a

¹³I. Prigogine and I. Stengers, *La Nouvelle alliance*, Bibliothèque des sciences humaines, Paris, N.R.F., 1979, pp. 278-279.

¹⁴P. Valéry, “La crise de l'esprit,” *op. cit.*, Vol. I, 1957, pp. 988-1013.

multifarious creativity continues to weave new threads. Such would be the key to the “ages” of Pericles, Augustus, St. Louis, the Renaissance, Louis XIV and, for Euro-America, the years from 1872 to 1914, so remarkable for the inventions produced and—immediately—exchanged.

Epochs in which the signs and works are feverishly circulated, mobilized as they are on all fronts. Why then should it be surprising that in the Golden Ages the spectacle of the multiplication and diversity of knowledge in progress eclipsed the perception of the underlying crisis?

Also, from that time a state of culture of a higher level is installed that will be called a state of civilization: what is a work of civilization? An organized response of the mind to a state of disorder, of crisis, of rupture, of imbalance, of danger. Or again, a moment of intensive activity of the human genius in response to a conjuncture that is destructive of the existing equilibrium. Thus a crisis, perhaps even more than at other moments of history, is accompanied by a concurrent production of activities that try to overcome it, to compensate for it and, what increases the volume and pertinence of this production, of a movement made feverish by danger, signs and works proper to convey messages of solutions: “A symbol only exists if it is put into circulation,” writes Ferdinand de Saussure.¹⁵ In short, moments of grandeur, classicisms, Golden Ages, ages of equilibrium, moments of affirmation of a style, years of energy of a people would not be moments exempt from crisis but moments in which the terrifying intuition, in the tragic seizure of an insurmountable contradiction, challenges rupture by a leap, a wager, an invention without retreat. Thus in decisive hours there is a response that adjusts itself to the crisis blow by blow. Without getting rid of social, economic and political perils—to which it precisely responds—the plenary hour of civilization opposes, even in the name of Utopia, a master form that is a way of solving them while continuing on its march. The mind that seeks to understand has only to consider the solutions found by genius; a seemingly faultless fabric, a continual series, an explanation through reason alone, are substituted for the disorder. Gandhi, awakening and

¹⁵ J. Starobinski, *Les mots sous les mots, (Les anagrammes de Ferdinand de Saussure)*, Coll. Le Chemin, Paris, N.R.F., 1971.

Crisis and Civilization

establishing a nation with his message of non-violence—whose Utopia will remain alive despite the deceptions, De Gaulle mustering the Free French.

There is a reservation, however. This circulation of signs, reciprocal to ruptures and crises, a primary manifestation of a culture engaged in the process of its growth, favors a vision of synthesis and equilibrium that, most often, will be affirmed in a mythical way:

*“Talia saecla” suis dixerunt “currite” fuis
Concordes stabili fatorum numine Parcae”
(To the decrees of destiny the Fates in agreement
Said to their spindles: “Keep spinning...”)¹⁶*

The fourth eclogue of Virgil’s *Bucolics* announces an age of gold spun by the Fates at the order of the gods. Caesar Augustus, who made an attempt against the Republic, needed to justify his rule. This prophetic reference was welcome. We must suspect the Golden Ages of being the work of an ideology at the service of a tyrant, indeed, of a dominating class, seeking some cosmic cause that stands as security for it in public opinion. However, this state of equilibrium, as soon as it is manifested by the social institution, fixed in political ideologies, defined by formalism and academisms, prepares the reappearance of a more acute crisis, one that is more dangerous for being no longer present in consciences. Wills are no longer on the alert; they are as if dispossessed of their intense virtualities. The circuit of appeals and urgencies that assured the heroic progress of creations slows down, breaks. For progress in invention is substituted the confusion of an uncontrolled crisis. Blocking, dissociations, destructions become more acute and remain without solutions. The official view, deformed by myth, delays the realization of the new truths. There are no longer temperate regulations but authoritarian and oppressive bureaucratic reactions.

The imperious thought of Karl Marx culminates in his analysis of crisis in *Das Kapital*, of which some of the most vigorous pages are found in his unpublished manuscripts. He comes to the

¹⁶ Virgil, *Bucoliques*, IV eclogue, v. 46-7, trans. by Paul Valéry, *op.cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 246-247.

conclusion that an inevitable class struggle must occur and that capitalism must be eliminated. He absolutely refuses to envisage a future with a reciprocal evolution of the antagonistic classes that would overcome the contradictions of a capitalistic regime. To foresee a working class that, through the action of the labor unions, accedes to the sharing of economic responsibilities, the capitalist class, willing or not, become wiser in its “immoderate appetite... to get rich and capitalize,” appeared to him as a confusion of thought, the negation of the results of his reflection on the inevitable crisis to which the capitalist system is destined: “Capital is a contradiction in action.”

Can we hope, in this twentieth century, that Euro-America in which we see a surge of science and technique, of economy, such as has never before been seen in human history, that the enemy classes may achieve solidarity on the chances of one and the same evolution? It remains that the relationship of the advanced industrial countries with under-developed countries rebuilds the rapports of exploitation denounced in *Das Kapital* and that we cannot speak of a veritable “intelligence and mastery of nature by all of society—in short, the full flowering of the social individual.”¹⁷ The state of crisis covers the entire planet and it is not certain that it is not worsening.

Now, it enters into the logic of crisis to increase imbalance and lead to the irreversible dissociation of the organizations thus destabilized. “March toward the crisis” as one marches toward the cannon is to adopt a strategy of revolution and, through the new powers this installs, eliminate the adversary.

The strategy of crisis excludes peaceful coexistence, but it is necessary to say at what price. The alternative between intellectual liberty, coexistence and a strategy of crisis, revolution and war has something else at stake: peace, the preservation of human lives and intellectual liberty, cementing civilizations and confirming their progress. The effervescence of intelligence and talent, so remarkable in the first years of the French Revolution—in Berlin in the twenties until the arrival of Nazism and the exile of Brecht

¹⁷K. Marx, *Oeuvres*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris, N.R.F., 1968; Vol. II: *Economie*, “Machinisme, science et loisir créateur,” p. 304 *et seq.*; “*Les Crises*,” p. 459 *et seq.*; also “Fragments,” p. 1484 *et seq.*

Crisis and Civilization

and Einstein; in Italy, when Mussolini came to power...—was each time arrested, then stifled by totalitarian solutions which brought an end to the crises. Such concordances signify that crisis, at the moment it appears, provokes ideas, calls intelligence to a response through multiple inventions. From that comes the intellectual and artistic fervor of the periods that introduce crises. “Marching toward the crisis” compromises such possibilities. It is equal to a war strategy that aims at the annihilation of the adversary. It leaves no room for the specific possibilities of the human genius, such as they are manifested in the progress of science and technology, nor for a concern for the common good, for the *res publica*, through which consciences could be regained without regard to class behavior.

The passage of a society from the level of culture to the level of civilization is the result of a crisis in its particularism and its overcoming. Crisis is, then, attached to a progress. An archaic culture is entirely mobilized by the works of its growth. Its capacities of invention are reciprocal to a regional conjuncture and environment in which foreign influences, sensed but not filtered, do not constitute challenges; they are barely on the horizon. The description of such states of culture could be ecological: some kind of synthesis between a social and economic idiosyncrasy and its particular geography. The archaism of cultures that have not been emancipated into civilizations resides precisely in this autonomy concentrated on itself; thus it is always marked by the traits of a certain regionalism.

On the contrary, a culture enters its classic age, gains for itself those rational and universal characteristics that, according to Spengler, bring it to a state of civilization when the intrusion of foreign cultures puts into question its self-sufficiency and the balances that have assured it up until then. At the same time, it finds its own resources for an invention that replaces it in its logic of growth. Development follows in the continuity of the acquired values but in terms of opening, synthesis, marked synthesis, marked evolution.

Such is the classical age of a culture when, from its techniques to its ethic, entirely re-examined because of the “foreigner”, it responds by open structures associating the superior stage to the preceding levels, in a positive way and like so many ferments

retroacting on the whole. Thus it is that at the end of the neolithic, the insular culture of the Cyclades evolved into a civilization, the Minoan, that assimilated Phoenician and Egyptian contributions into a new synthesis.

Athens, in the fifth century B.C.; the Florence of the Medici; the century of Louis XIV are moments in which a culture, facing crisis because of foreign intrusion, placed itself, in order to overcome it, on the world horizon. Not that this horizon was effectively that of the entire world; they were deemed to be those curved-over lands that had been discovered. Development can then follow its course in the continuity of the acquired values. It takes on a world-wide appearance. A new answer, in a universal perspective, open to an infinity of confrontations, reason and resulting evolution. A culture which was, up until then, the solution of a group for a regional problematic rises to solutions that can take in all differences without being diluted. Perhaps this phenomenon ends exemplarily—before being the one that is the object of the planet today—in the centuries of Western renaissance. Through techniques, printing, navigation on the high seas, through the discovery of continents, through the installation of State politics, through the recognition of national languages, the regional cultures of Europe are forced, by progress, to accede to those rational and universal levels of civilization that characterize them as soon as they experience “renaissance.”

Let us give a quasi-contemporary example, at first sight unexpected, in this regard. It concerns the purely literary work of James Joyce. An illustration of the problems of civilization in their relationship with single cultures at their rarely achieved level, subjective and universal at the same time. This is why Joyce's work continues to exercise a decisive influence on the conscience of modernity; above all, it does so in such a fertile perspective that it may appear as a clue to the roads to take. In the language of the conquering English, Joyce raises the spiritual virtualities of a humiliated Ireland to new heights—to the dimensions of the urban and planetary civilization of today. In this way, a culture gains for itself the rank of civilization in the sense in which Spengler understood it of a culture governed by the values of reason, that is, of universality. A moment of civilization in the full sense of the word, when a culture, challenged and menaced by those appearing

Crisis and Civilization

on its horizon, finds in its internal dynamism the ability to collect and assimilate them, without disappearing; the chance to rise above itself and the confrontations to accede to exchanges or horizons of the world, to a historically located universality. James Joyce, a young student in Dublin, is ironic toward the partisans of a renaissance of the Irish language, fallen into disuse. In his opinion, it is a weakness at the moment when the greatest strength is needed; he wanted a “resolutely modern” Ireland. Consequently, he had to write novels in the language of the enemy, so that the genius of this nation could be affirmed. It was an enormous gain for Ireland, since, through the author of *Finnegan’s Wake*, Gaelic culture entered into the modern discussions of civilization, took part in it as a forerunner: a civilization that is a culture desiring a crisis only to overcome it and grow still more; these are the laws of life and, with more impatience, those of the mind. They then take the form of that “infinite task” with which Husserl invests European humanity.¹⁸

Let us return to modernity, conceived as a realization of a crisis opened to the present of a history on the march and remaining to be interpreted in all aspects. Modernity is not the refusal of history for the profit of present interest but the consciousness that history neither explains nor resolves anything; it is rather an ironic accompaniment to the present as in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which makes it even more enigmatic. More dramatic, also, since in the light of present actions history is seen as a succession of chance responses. The cycles that appear in it are those of invention culminating, here and there, in works of civilization—classicism, golden ages, apogees—not to serve as references but as manifestations of the virtues of the human mind which at each crisis must be recognized.

On the planetary horizon in which it unfolds, techno-productive rationality, instrument of indefinite mastery, has become a major risk. Not only does this rationality, of which the capitalist system is only one form projected among others, put into crisis the cultures that it affects—and it affects all of them, if it has not ruined them—but this rationality is the agent of its own

¹⁸E. Husserl, “La crise de l’humanité européenne et de la philosophie,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, No. 3, Paris, 1950. Reduplication Paulet, 2, Paris, April 1968.

dissociation to the degree in which the ends of power or profit take precedence over the ends of human liberation. The overcoming of this crisis will not in any way be a return to the values of the past but the result of an invention whose formula is nowhere given. It can proceed through the capacities of the human mind to defy the crisis by an invention reciprocal to the danger. At the beginning of a crisis there is the figure of something totally different, fears, regressions that it engenders. These can be overcome by the audacity of the solutions. They must be aided. Through a circulation of consciences, analyses, projects, strategies, that decide the actions and tactics that are the first to be daring in their answers.

Edmond Radar
(*Brussels*)